



Effective Communication: Always Working for a Safer and Healthier Washington

“Public health” is something everyone counts on but seldom stops to think about—until something goes wrong. When a drinking water system fails, the importance of clean water is suddenly apparent. When a new disease emerges—such as West Nile virus—it becomes clear that we need public health expertise to monitor, track, diagnose, and advise.

According to research conducted during 2001 for the PHIP, few people use the term “public health” when discussing health-related issues, yet they count on public health agencies to protect them from dangers that are beyond their control, including communicable diseases and unsafe food and water. The Washington research also revealed that people rely on *local* public health agencies and like knowing that their county health department is part of a larger network of public health agencies working together to perform this function.

One danger in taking public health for granted is that we may neglect or dismantle the system that ensures our quality of life. By the time we notice the consequences of this neglect, rebuilding the system would be difficult and expensive. For this reason, it is important that Washington residents understand how public health affects their lives every day. It is also important for them to see how they can play a role in improving the public’s health, by promoting community projects, supporting health improvement goals, and actively participating in public health policy debates.

The PHIP is developing a communication process to describe public health. Its Communications Committee commissioned the 2001 research and is using the findings to inform an evidence-based Communications Plan for use by officials and agencies. The plan has four broad goals:

- To help public health agencies define and convey what they do.

- To build a unified, statewide perception of what public health agencies are.
- To provide tools that public health agencies can use to communicate consistently throughout their programs, products, and services.
- To inform planning and decisions.

The overall purpose of this work is to convey consistent messages about public health. The Communications Plan uses an “identity platform” to ensure that public communications step back from scientific technical terms and instead use words and phrases that people can easily understand and use for good decision-making about their



“People need to understand the importance of public health and the impact that health promotion and disease prevention can have on our lives.”

*—Communications Committee
Co-chair Kay Koontz (Director,
Southwest Washington Health
District)*

health and their community's health. Toward this goal, the committee's work translates the sometimes scientific language that public health professionals use with each other into concepts and terms that carry meaning for different audiences, including the general public, the business community, elected officials, and the news media. For example, the broad public health mission of protecting communities from harm and promoting healthy behaviors has been stated as:

*Always working for a safer and
healthier Washington.*

And the elements of this work—conducting health promotion programs, collecting data to assess and monitor community health, and regulating restaurants and water and other systems—are described as:

Essential programs for improving health

Information that works

Protecting you and your family every day

The 2001 research also identified phrases that public health workers would best avoid—phrases that are paternalistic, bureaucratic, overly scientific, and that suggest public health activities occur invisibly or “behind the scenes.”

*Communication tools
include basic materials
that can be tailored to
local public health
agencies.*

For more information about Communication:

PHIP Communications Committee Page

[http://www.doh.wa.gov/hip/
Communications.htm](http://www.doh.wa.gov/hip/Communications.htm)

H.E.R.E in Washington, Health Education Resource Exchange

<http://www.doh.wa.gov/here/>

Local agencies will receive public information kits with tools such as PowerPoint presentations and public service announcements, artwork, and advice on working with reporters. The Communications Plan calls for statewide training for Washington's public health workforce to become comfortable and proficient with the identity platform's elements so they can use them in their communities.

Over time, the Communications Committee will evaluate the outcomes of the plan by methods such as monitoring stories in the news media, surveying public health officials, and in a few years, repeating research about consumer perceptions and the system that is “always working for a safer and healthier Washington.”

PUBLIC HEALTH

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HEALTHIER WASHINGTON



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Recommendations for 2003-2005

1. Prepare public health workers and community partners to describe the business of public health agencies and how they work to protect and improve the health of people. Accomplish this by providing training, materials, and continuing communications support.

Research has demonstrated that the public places high value on public health services but may not understand exactly how these services are provided and supported within every community. Coordinated training and tools will help public health workers and their partners improve understanding of the important work of public health.

2. Assure that all public health agencies are prepared to carry out effective communications when responding to public health emergencies and local issues of concern.

Clear, swift communication is vital when a community faces a public health threat of any kind. Agencies must have requisite skills on tap or know how to access them by arrangement. Coordination across agencies is essential to reduce wasted effort and assure that messages stay clear and consistent.